

WEBB, HARRI (1920 - 1994), librarian and poet

Name: Harri Webb
Date of birth: 1920
Date of death: 1994
Gender: Male
Occupation: librarian and poet
Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Poetry
Author: Desmond Clifford

Harri Webb was born on 7 September 1920 at 45 Tŷ Coch Road, Sketty, Swansea, the son of William John Webb (1890-1956, a foreman at the Tir John North power-station in Swansea, originally from a Gower farming family, and his wife Lucy Irene (née Gibbs, 1890-1939), the daughter of a worker on the Kilvrough estate. The family moved in 1922 to 58 Catherine Street where Harri was brought up. His baptismal name was Harry, and he adopted the Welsh spelling Harri in about 1950 soon after he began publishing his poetry. He had a half-brother, Michael Webb, from his father's second marriage.

Webb attended primary school in Oxford Street and Glanmor Secondary Boys' School in the Uplands district of Swansea. He was an exceptional pupil and became the first from his school to win a scholarship to Oxford University. In honour of this achievement the headmaster awarded a half-day holiday to the school, an occurrence of which Webb remained proud. At Magdalen College, Oxford, he studied modern languages and, by his own account, 'worked, got drunk and learned how to smoke.' His time at Oxford was blighted by the death in 1939 of his mother to whom he was devoted. He was awarded a 3rd class degree and a rift opened with his father which remained unhealed with Harri not attending his funeral.

After graduation Webb volunteered for the Royal Navy and served on a number of vessels through the war years. He was on board *HMS Tetcott*, a Type 2 Hunt-class destroyer, the last ship to leave Tobruk as it fell to the Germans. Years later he recalled the terrifying experience of being dive-bombed at sea but expressed great admiration for Rommel. After the war he was demobbed in Scotland where he remained for a period unsure of how to progress his life.

He returned to Wales in 1946 and took a job in Carmarthen with Keidrych Rhys, the founder of *Wales* magazine and the Druid Press, and an early advocate of 'Anglo-Welsh' literature, as it was then styled. He had begun writing poetry during the war and had his first poem published in 1949.

In 1954 he moved to Merthyr to take up the post of librarian in Dowlais, a calling he followed for 20 years without ever taking a professional qualification. He lived at Garth Newydd, a house on Brecon Road which seemed to belong to nobody and became a nationalist commune, including among its residents *Meic Stephens*, who became his close friend and editor.

After 10 years at Dowlais Webb moved to Mountain Ash Library where he remained until 1974 after which he wrote full-time (TV scripts and journalism as well as poetry). Webb found librarianship congenial but took it seriously and modernised services by acquiring LPs to meet the new demand for music and stocks of books and magazines appealing to women readers.

His first, and best, collection of poetry was *The Green Desert* (1969). This was followed by *A Crown for Branwen* (1974), *Rampage and Revel* (1977) and *Poetry and Points* in 1983. Many of his poems appeared first in *Poetry Wales* as well as several other magazines and newspapers. His *Collected Poems* appeared posthumously in 1995 edited by *Meic Stephens*. He became well-known to the literary public of Wales in the 1970s through regular appearances on BBC Wales's *Poems and Pints*, which brought poetry and comedy into the nation's living rooms through television.

Webb was a militant nationalist, active in Plaid Cymru and editor 1962-1964 of its paper, *The Welsh Nation*, which provided a platform for his trenchantly expressed views. At the 1970 general election he stood as a parliamentary candidate but, in truth, Plaid was too anaemic for him. Through the 1950s he had associated with the Welsh Republican movement - sustained by a handful of people like *Gwilym Prys Davies*, Cliff Bere, Huw Davies, Ithel Davies - and edited its bi-monthly newspaper. The movement failed to take popular root and Harri eventually moved on to Plaid as a realistic second best.

Webb was as polemic in his literary views as he was in politics. He was contemptuous of *Dylan Thomas* thinking him 'irrelevant', and barely less dismissive of *R. S. Thomas* despite sharing a good deal of the same political outlook, disliking his dog-collar and po-faced seriousness.

Webb's poetry was a riot of humour and satire but he was also capable of grace, depth and delicate beauty. He wrote only about Wales and for Wales: if there had been a national poet in those days he would surely have been selected. Nearly all his work was in English although his lovely Welsh poem 'Colli Iait'h' ('Losing a Language'), set to music by *Meredydd Evans* and sung by Heather Jones, became a frequently performed classic. In later years he disparaged English writing and said only work in Welsh was important, a political rather than a literary sentiment. Webb had learned Welsh proficiently, read widely, translated poetry and cultivated proudly the dialect of Dowlais which he believed to be the purest extant form of Welsh.

His view of Wales was geographically confined to the southern valleys, Swansea and Gower. He was anti-English but disliked people from north Wales too and wrote a verse, 'Please Keep your Gog on a Lead'. He thought *Robert Williams Parry* was Wales' finest poet and felt something akin to hero-worship for *Waldo Williams*. Webb's great regret was that a photo of them together at their only meeting had failed to develop, an incident he recorded in his poem 'Waldo'.

In 1972 Webb relocated to Cwmbach in the Rhondda where he remained until his final days. His health declined following a stroke in 1986 and while he wrote little he continued to read voraciously; his flat was crammed with library shelves across all the available space. He moved to a nursing home in Swansea shortly before his death on 31 December 1994. He was buried at St Mary's Church in Pennard, Gower, on 6 January 1995.

Author

Desmond Clifford

Sources

Brian Morris, *Harri Webb* (Cardiff 1993)

Harri Webb, Meic Stephens (ed.), *Harri Webb: collected poems* (Llandysul 1995)

Harri Webb, Meic Stephens (ed.), *No half-way house: Harri Webb: selected political journalism* (Ceredigion 1997)

D. Clifford, interview with Harri Webb, 11 June, 1990

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Harri Webb](#)

Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Harri Webb Papers](#)

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